

## ***The Impact of Parental Incarceration: What Mentors Need to Know***

There is no “typical” child of an incarcerated parent. As Ann Adalist-Estrin, of the Family and Corrections Network ([www.fcnetwork.org](http://www.fcnetwork.org)), states in her Caregiver's Choice training, the impact of parental incarceration can and does vary for each child and each family.

The truth remains, however, that the needs of children with incarcerated parents can be complex. While it's important for mentors to care deeply about the children they work with, they also need training and support throughout the duration of the match.

### ***The Importance of Balance***

It is critical that mentoring programs provide in-depth training regarding the impact of parental incarceration on children—including common feelings and family dynamics—to their mentors. In those trainings, it is important to balance the information shared with mentors. Although the negative statistics associated with these children speak loudly, they often fail to take into account the remarkable strength and the diverse experiences of families impacted by incarceration.

Additionally, there must be a balance when approaching the reality of parental incarceration—neither talking about it too much, nor talking about it too little. It is critical to treat young people with incarcerated parents as *children*, not focusing too heavily on their situation; at the same time, it is important to create space for them to share their feelings and experiences, instead of downplaying the realities the children are facing.

### ***How can you train your mentors on the impact of parental incarceration?***

*Don't just talk theoretically.* It's easier to say what you would do in a situation—or what someone else should do—when you are not in it. Give mentors examples of real-life situations that mentees' families could be facing, and role-play together. Following each role-play, discuss the issues and the responses.

*Bring in outside speakers.* An especially helpful way to train your mentors is to invite experts to speak to them. Family members of the incarcerated and formerly incarcerated individuals themselves have valuable insights and experiences to share. They can answer questions your mentors might have about working with this population.

*Talk about “protective factors.”* Risk factors that children with incarcerated parents experience are often spoken of; protective factors, however, are referred to less often. Take time to talk to your mentors about these factors, which include the child's:

- Relationship with their caregiver. A close, supportive relationship is the single most important factor in mitigating the negative effects of trauma.
- Relationship with the incarcerated parent. Maintaining this relationship, when possible and safe, is likely to improve the child's long-term outcomes.

- Relationships with other caring adults. Mentors are among these caring, non-family adults.
- *Address potential stereotypes.* Even without realizing it, many mentors will have biases and stereotypes that affect the way they relate to mentees and the families of mentees. During your training, take mentors through an exercise that helps them uncover and address their own attitudes and assumptions.

*Provide resources.* As detailed in the June MCOP:CC newsletter, there is a wide variety of informative resources available on the Web. The following articles offer excellent information for your mentors:

*The Impact of Parental Incarceration on Children*, [www.fcnetwork.org/cpl/CPL304-DifferentChildren.html](http://www.fcnetwork.org/cpl/CPL304-DifferentChildren.html)

*Broken Bonds: Understanding and Addressing the Needs of Children with Incarcerated Parents*  
<http://www.urban.org/publications/411616.html>

*Families Left Behind: The Hidden Costs of Incarceration and Reentry*  
[www.urban.org/publications/310882.html](http://www.urban.org/publications/310882.html)

### ***In Conclusion***

Make it clear to your mentors that although they play an important role in the lives of their mentees, they are not meant to be parents, guardians, or social workers. Help your mentors, through trainings and match monitoring, to set realistic expectations for themselves and their mentees. Mentors should not be the universal problem-solver. Mentors are meant to be friends and confidants, listeners and guides.